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**The Missing Link: Bringing Institutions back
into the Debate on Economic Globalisation**

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Abstract

Faced with ongoing debates on globalisation, societal institutionalism in its traditional form is showing its limits. In this paper, we suggest that a serious sociologically grounded and institutional contribution to the ongoing debate on global governance calls for a shift in focus – away from the preoccupation with national configurations and towards an attempt at understanding transnational recombinations. The investigation of transnational recombination calls for new analytical tools. Here we argue that the solution may come from an hybridisation of NBS and VOC approaches with other variants of the institutionalist argument in particular those we label ‘cultural’ or ‘phenomenological’. We elaborate on three aspects of institutional analysis that we identify as key to getting a better understanding of the relationship between globalisation and institutions. Firstly, we propose an interpretation of institutionalisation as a process and not a state of things. Secondly, we reinterpret institutional genesis and institutional change as revealing recombination. Thirdly, we argue for a more systematic analysis of the interplay of such processes of recombination across different levels of analysis, particularly the national and the transnational.

With a conceptual framework so reformulated, it is possible to take in the transnational reality in its full complexity. We show, on the one hand, how the NBS and VOC perspectives are an interesting starting base to look at the structuration and stabilisation of the transnational reality. On the other hand, we gain new insights in the ways in which institution building and recombination at the transnational level become reflected – often progressively and somewhat incrementally – at the national business system level. Our proposition is that the succession and combination, over a long period of time, of a series of incremental and sometimes minor transformations could lead in the end to consequential and significant change.

Zusammenfassung

In der Auseinandersetzung mit der Globalisierung von Wirtschaftsprozessen kann sich die sozialwissenschaftliche Institutionentheorie nicht mehr auf die Untersuchung nationaler Konfigurationen beschränken, sondern sollte der transnationalen Rekombination institutioneller Arrangements mehr Aufmerksamkeit schenken. Für die Untersuchung solcher Prozesse sind veränderte analytische Werkzeuge erforderlich. Die Autorinnen dieses Beitrags schlagen eine Synthese von „National Business Systems-“ und „Varieties of Capitalism-“ Ansätzen mit kulturalistischen und phänomenologischen Varianten der Institutionentheorie vor. Es werden drei Aspekte der institutionellen Analyse vertieft, die zu einem besseren Verständnis des Verhältnisses von Globalisierung und Institutionen beitragen: Institutionalisierung als Prozeß, Rekombination als Mechanismus der Institutionengenesse und des Institutionenwandels und eine

Mehrebenenanalyse des Zusammenspiels von institutionellen Veränderungen auf nationaler und transnationaler Ebene.

Die vorgeschlagene Synthese verschiedener institutionalistischer Ansätze bietet einerseits Ansatzpunkte für die Untersuchung der Rolle nationaler Akteure in der Genese und Entwicklung transnationaler Institutionen. Andererseits trägt sie zu einem besseren Verständnis der Rekombination von Elementen verschiedener institutioneller Arrangements sowie der Herausbildung neuer Institutionen auf transnationaler Ebene bei. Diese Entwicklungen im transnationalen Raum wirken wiederum auf Institutionen in nationalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsräumen ein. Die Autorinnen des vorliegenden Beitrages argumentieren, daß die Abfolge und Kombination einer Reihe gradueller und zunächst geringfügiger Veränderungen über einen längeren Zeitraum hinweg zu einem signifikanten Wandel von gesellschaftlichen Institutionen führen können.

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1 Introduction¹

Globalisation is a word that suffers from overuse. It has been tainted, furthermore, by its association with overly simplistic images of a 'runaway world', of a technologically driven global village in the making (Ohmae 1990, Friedman 2000, Giddens 2000). Still, behind the over-stretched concept lies the contemporary reality of an economic world that is not fully contained nor constrained by national boundaries. Economic organisation and coordination increasingly reach across national borders and the impact is being felt both within the transnational sphere and, through rebound and indirect impact, also at the national level.

What happens to established patterns of economic organisation and coordination when actors move out of their local and national contexts and extend their horizon and experience to other local or national spheres where social relations are structured differently? What happens in the space in between national economies, the transnational arena, where actors originating from different local and national backgrounds meet and interact in ways that become increasingly structured and institutionalised? Those questions, we propose, point to an important research frontier in economic sociology today. The object of this paper is to start striding towards that frontier.

In the classical tradition, going from Weber (1978) to Veblen (1904) and Polanyi (1944), economic sociology has treated economic activity as being deeply embedded in wider institutional frames and schemes of societal and political relationships. This insight has been taken up anew quite strongly in the last decade or so with the revival of economic sociology and the multiplication of neo-institutional accounts (Guillén 2001). A fair number of those neo-institutional accounts, especially in sociology and political science, point to the societal or national level as highly structuring and constitutive historically of the institutional frames that embed economic activity. We use the broad label societal institutionalism to refer to those accounts. We put under this label a wide range of work – from historical institutionalism (Campbell et al. 1991, Hollingsworth and Boyer 1997), to the societal school (Maurice and Sorge 2000), the national business systems or varieties of capitalism traditions (Whitley 1999, Hall and Soskice 2001), the regulation school (Boyer et al. 1998, Boyer and Sailard

1 This paper has been presented at the EGOS Colloquium in Barcelona, 2002. We thank the participants of the standing working group 'Comparative Study of Economic Organization' as well as Sebastian Botzem and Dieter Plehwe for their critical comments and helpful suggestions for revisions. We are particularly grateful to John Meyer for his stimulating comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2002) as well as some cultural variants of the neo-institutional argument (Dobbin 1994).

Those different strands of societal institutionalism all depict national economies as essentially stable configurations embedded in robust national institutional frames. As a consequence, they predict a perpetuation of differences across national borders if not further divergence, even under strong pressures for change (Whitley 1999, Maurice and Sorge 2000, Hall and Soskice 2001). However, increasing evidence that national economies are evolving, sometimes significantly, points to the limits of this type of perspective. For societal institutionalism, the challenge in the coming years will be to bring change back in rather than evacuate it. Instead of denying or belittling the impact of external pressures on national systems, in particular those stemming from the transnational sphere, there is a need for factoring them in. This will probably require a reconsideration of some key tenets of societal institutionalism. In the process, we contend, the institutionalist perspective can contribute to the reinterpretation of globalisation by proposing more subtle and complex pictures of transnational economic interactions and governance patterns than is usually the case in the globalisation literature.

The paper is structured in the following way. In the first section, we briefly review the limits of societal institutionalism and we look at recent attempts to overcome these limits. In the second section of the paper, we propose to extend the reach of the societal institutionalist analytical framework to take in the transnational reality in its full complexity. Then, in the third section, we show how societal institutionalism, once reformulated and transformed, is an interesting starting base to look at the structuration and stabilisation of the transnational reality. We propose to reinterpret globalisation as transnational institutional recombination. Finally, we bridge levels of analysis in the last section. We gain new insights into the ways in which institution building and recombination at the transnational level become reflected – often progressively and somewhat incrementally – at the national level, leading in time to national institutional change. In the conclusion we discuss the implications for future research, at a conceptual and methodological level, and the potential contribution of such a reformulated institutionalist perspective to both the literature on globalisation and that on institutional change.

2 Globalisation as Challenge to Societal Institutionalism

The label ‘societal institutionalism’ refers to what is now a dense set of conceptual and empirical studies focusing on the historical emergence and contempo-

rary structuring of national economies. Research under this label has shown how the organisation of firms, as well as inter-organisational forms of economic coordination, vary from one national institutional system to another. Societal institutionalism has related the structures and strategies of firms, the relationships between different stakeholder groups, the roles of managers, the development and distribution of skills between various layers of employees to the distinct social and institutional settings in which firms operate. Furthermore, it has shown that patterns of industry specialisation, coordination between different economic actors, and the capabilities and competencies resulting from these interactions are equally influenced by the institutional setting.

2.1 Societal institutionalism – pointing to the limits

This literature has been extremely helpful in that it has provided an alternative to overly simplistic and decontextualized models of economic action so dominant in economic theory and business studies. A number of weaker points, however, have emerged and have become increasingly identified as such over the past few years.

First, societal institutionalism has focused on the structuring impact of institutional systems only of a national or societal kind. It has paid little attention to what was unfolding, either in the space beyond national institutional frames or else in subnational spheres. Societal institutionalism has treated national economies as isolated and discrete units where patterns of economic organisation and action stabilise over time as a result of the continued and repeated interaction of domestic actors with their national institutional environment.

Secondly, within this framework the direction of causality has generally run from macro-level institutional context to micro- or meso-level forms of organisation, coordination or action. Societal institutionalism conceives of macro-level institutions as independent variables that influence the behaviour of economic actors so that specific and relatively stable patterns of organisation and coordination emerge and are reproduced. Not only has the relationship between institutions and economic actors been construed as going essentially one way, it has also been conceptualised in a rather deterministic manner. This left little room for the actors to select, enact and innovate, be it with respect to their organisational and action patterns or with respect to the institutional environment itself.

Third, and as a result, societal institutionalism has insisted upon the continuity and resilience of institutions, building upon in particular the idea of path dependencies (Nelson and Winter 1982, David 1993). Societal institutionalism

has tended to conceptualise path dependencies in rather general and unspecific terms such as the 'past influences the present' or even shapes it. There has been some allowance in this literature for the gradual and incremental adaptation of particular institutional features but with little impact ultimately on the system as a whole. The idea of radical change in the form of abrupt overhaul of the system logic need not be evacuated entirely. However, it is bound to be extremely rare and it could happen only at exceptional historical junctures where the overall geopolitical and national balance of power was deeply disrupted – after destructive wars, during periods of occupation or colonisation or at moments of radical regime change such as in Eastern Europe after 1989.

2.2 The globalisation challenge and early attempts at dealing with it

The main focus of societal institutionalism has been the systemic nature of national configurations of institutions. And a key preoccupation of that literature has been to show how those stable systems in turn shape and define national economic organisations and their self-reproduction. The picture has generally been one of multiple closed systems, where each national ensemble – institutions and organisations – functions in relative isolation from the others. Such a description of social and economic reality may hold as a kind of ideal type for the past – and even there with a varying degree of applicability in different historical periods. It clearly becomes obsolete, however, with the growing transnational interconnectedness of economic actors across the world and the emergence and strengthening of various forms of institutionalised rule systems at the transnational level (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000, Djelic and Quack 2003, Drori 2003).

There have been a number of attempts to date to adapt the analytical framework of societal institutionalism in a way that can help meet the theoretical challenges raised by economic globalisation. These attempts reflect essentially three main strategies. One path has been to call into question the conception of institutions as fully determining economic organisation and action. The idea, instead, is to highlight and look for the degrees of freedom that economic actors can enjoy within a given institutional framework. The focus, here, is on the existing and potential variety of strategies and behavioural patterns within a given society (Sorge 2000) as well as on the tensions that can arise from the conflicting interests of different societal groups leading to contradictions within a particular societal system and potentially to institutional change (Almond and Rubery 2000). In his studies of the German biotech sector, Casper has made explicit this critique of societal institutionalism, suggesting that

“static descriptions of existing institutional environments must be combined with micro-level accounts, tracing how firms, governments, and other actors within the economy experiment with, and at times re-configure, the institutional tool-kits at their disposal”. (Casper 2000)

Such micro-level accounts can build upon various theoretical approaches. Where Casper (2000) turns to micro-economic theories to bridge the gap between dynamic interactions at the level of firms, regulators or policy makers and pre-existing institutional frames, others make use of interactionism or realist ethnography (Sharpe 2001, 2002).

A second route for adapting societal institutionalism has been to explore what happens when actors or organisations become involved in multiple institutional environments with different and sometimes conflicting rule systems. A particularly interesting laboratory here appears to be the multinational company and in recent years studies on its nature and development have flourished (Lane 2000, Morgan, Kristensen and Whitley 2001). The internationalisation of companies creates a ‘battlefield’ where different constituencies enter in conflict and negotiate (Kristensen and Zeitlin 2001, Sharpe 2001). Transnational transfers of business practices generally lead to hybridisation of practices at the organisational level but also of managerial ‘mental maps’ (Smith and Elger 2000, Lane 2000). In time, as Christel Lane (2001) argues in the case of German pharmaceutical companies, this can trigger a transformation of domestic institutions. When change in leading transnational companies reaches a critical mass, managers are encouraged or even required to press for institutional reforms at the national level.

A third path, still barely explored, would be to look at the transnational arena as an institutionalised or institutionalising space. Hollingsworth and Boyer (1997), for example, argue that social systems of production need increasingly to be seen as nested within a complex system of regional, national but also international arrangements. Whitley (2003) argues that since 1945 the international business environment has undergone a transformation from a particularistic logic to an increasing formalisation and standardisation of the rules of the economic game. So far, however, societal institutionalism has contributed little to our understanding of the processes leading to the emergence of new institutional arrangements in the transnational sphere. The few budding attempts, recently, at exploring this frontier have built in part upon different theoretical backgrounds. Authors like Brunsson and Jacobsson (2000), Morgan (2001a, 2000b), Djelic and Bensedrine (2001) or Plehwe (2003) look at the actors, pre-conditions and mechanisms involved in the emergence and transformation of institutions in the ‘transnational social space’ (Morgan 2001a).

A key challenge for societal institutionalism is to move beyond itself to contribute to an understanding of transnational institution building in all its complex-

ity. Much could be gained, we believe, by looking at institution building in the transnational space as revealing in part processes of recombination of pre-existing institutional elements – the latter having often a national dimension and origin. In the following two sections, we draw on a set of empirical studies that describe and explore transnational processes of institutionalisation (see Djelic and Quack 2003) to develop a more systematic analytical framework. We build upon some key insights of societal institutionalism but we attempt to extend its reach to the space in between nations by combining it with other variants of the institutionalist argument, in particular ‘cultural’ ones that give more attention to the normative and cognitive dimensions of institutions (Berger and Luckmann 1967, Douglas 1986, Scott and Meyer et al. 1994, Jepperson 2000a, 2000b). We also bring actors back in and their variable capacity, on the ‘battlefield’, to enact, edit or invent structures and institutions. We believe that a blending of societal and cultural variants of institutionalism and their cross-fertilisation can help reach a deeper understanding of ongoing processes of institutional change in relation to globalisation.²

If we are going to argue that transnational arenas may be institutionalised or institutionalising spheres, there is a need we believe to think in turn about the potential impact these transnational institutional frames may have on societal institutions and hence on national economies. There is a need for bridging levels of analysis and getting, in particular, at a better understanding of the interplay between processes of institutionalisation (and de-institutionalisation) at the transnational and national levels. This, we propose, is another important challenge for societal institutionalism to take up in the coming years. In the last section of this paper, we start building a framework outlining how this could be done.

3 Extending the Reach of Societal Institutionalism

Societal institutionalism has undeniably contributed to deepening our understanding of economic activity and interactions. It proposes an alternative to decontextualized and universalistic models of economic action. And it gets much closer than those models, most of the time, to real life patterns and processes (Hollingsworth et al. 2002). We keep the strong claim of societal institutionalism that economic activity cannot be conceived of in isolation from other spheres of social action. Rather, it should be looked at as being deeply embed-

2 The main difference between our approach and ongoing work around the issues of globalisation and Europe in political science lies, we believe, in our more encompassing definition of institutions as normative and cognitive arrangements as well as in the attention we pay to a wide range of different actors.

ded in wider institutional frames. But to extend its reach so that it can take in the structuring of economic activity at other than national or societal levels, we point essentially in three directions. First, we elaborate on the need to move away from a concept of institutional configurations to the more dynamic idea of processes of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation. Second, we argue for bringing actors back in. Third, we propose a new understanding of institutional change.

3.1 From institutional systems to processes of institutionalisation

According to Tolbert and Zucker (1996) the emergence of institutions is a process in three stages. First, actors develop through recurrent and regular interactions patterned reactions to problems to which shared meanings and understandings become attached (see also Berger and Luckmann 1967). This is in fact a pre-institutionalisation stage.

Then these particular meanings and understandings become generalised beyond the specific context in which they crystallized. This second stage can be called the objectification stage and goes together with the stabilisation of a consensus among social actors about the value of the behavioural patterns and of their associated meanings and understandings. This consensus can translate into preliminary structures and rules that on the whole remain fragile at this semi-institutionalised stage and can still be revised or even challenged.

The third and last stage of institutionalisation is one of 'sedimentation'. It is characterised both by an even wider spread of patterned behaviours and meanings and by the solidification and perpetuation of structures. It is during this last stage that institutions can potentially acquire the 'quality of exteriority', i.e. become taken-for-granted and develop a reality of their own.

The logical sequencing goes from habituation to sedimentation. However, it is possible in a number of situations to skip the first stage – the habituation stage. The diffusion of institutional rules preexisting in a different context represents such a short cut with a direct move into the objectification stage (Tolbert and Zucker 1996). Following DiMaggio and Powell (1983), there are three main channels for such a process of diffusion – the coercive, the mimetic and the normative. All three types of channels may be operative simultaneously thus reinforcing each other. They may also alternate or follow each other – the coercive channel being supported over time or even replaced by mimetic and normative ones (Djelic 1998).

Moving from institutions to institutionalisation and thinking about the latter as a set of sequential stages – habituation, objectification and sedimentation – suggests that the level of embeddedness and robustness of institutional rules will vary. We propose that certain patterns of social behaviour – those that are semi-institutionalised or still at stage one or two – will be more likely to become subject to critical evaluation, modification and elimination than others – those that are fully institutionalised. Or as Jepperson (1991) puts it, degrees of institutionalisation are best conceived in terms of relative vulnerability to social intervention. Thinking about institutionalisation as a process also implies to think in parallel about processes of de-institutionalisation.

Within a given society, varying patterns of behaviours will coexist that situate themselves at different stages of institutionalisation. Instead of considering the systemic nature of institutional arrangements, we should take in this internal diversity and differentiation and the contradictions that it may generate (Sewell 1992, Clemens and Cook 1999). We should also look at border points or points of interface through which alternatives may appear. In this paper, we focus in particular on those points of interface that put in contact the national and the transnational. Together, those are the cracks in the system – or at its boundaries – that are likely to make it more vulnerable. Those cracks or weaker points indicate the more obvious potential loci for change – that is processes of de-institutionalisation coupled with processes of re-institutionalisation.

We argue that external pressures can act as triggers. Major shifts in the environment, such as long lasting alterations in markets or radical changes in technology may play a role. Internationalisation, we add, is also in itself source of pressure (see also Westney 1987, Campbell 1993, Djelic 1998, Boyer et al. 1998). Our claim is that we should combine a focus on internal loci of disruptions and opportunities with an argument on external triggers of change. We point to institutional change as emerging where and when internal challenges and spaces of opportunity combine with and are being reinforced by external triggers and alternatives. Globalisation is in part about the multiplication of configurations of that type.

3.2 Bringing actors back in

Moving from the idea of institutional system or configuration to that of combined processes of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation opens the door, we have seen, to the possibility of social intervention and hence agency. Institutions are not only constraining; they are also enabling. Institutions are not static systems; they are malleable processes.

The understanding of institutions presented here as not only constraining but also enabling points to the role and significance of actors, that may sometimes deserve the label 'institutional entrepreneurs' (Fligstein and Mara-Drita 1996). Institutional change comes about when certain groups or networks of actors develop new patterns of interaction, from scratch or through bricolage, when certain groups or networks seize upon patterns existing elsewhere and promote them as superior to existing arrangements, working to mobilise as large and significant a support as possible for that project (Djelic 2001, Kleiner 2003).

The extent and nature of the challenge to institutions or institutionalising rule systems will closely depend upon the types of actors involved. From the perspective we develop here that the national/transnational interface is important to understand changes in national institutional systems, we need in particular to differentiate between fringe and dominant actors but also between domestic and foreign actors.

Fringe players are located at the periphery of a particular sphere – be it an industry, an organisation field or a geographical territory. They tend to have little power, low social status and limited access to resources. In situations of relative stability and closure of that economic sphere, the seat of change – if any – is likely to lie with a few of those fringe players. Most of them will remain powerless and passive. The few that may take initiative, however, could be quite innovative. During periods of stability and closure, local fringe players have more incentives than dominant players to experiment with new solutions. These experiments are less costly to them in terms of reputation. Those actors are also less likely to be sanctioned by central players for violating rule systems and, if successful, they have to gain increased power and social status from institutional change. Their innovations may become legitimated and institutionalised through adoption and adaptation by dominant players (Leblebici et al. 1991, Stearns and Allan 1996, Jones 2002).

Dominant actors are those who hold a central position in terms of power and social status within a particular sphere – be it an industry, an organisational field or a geographical territory. Power and status are generally reflected in privileged access to resources. During periods of stability and relative closure of the economic sphere, dominant local actors will have a tendency to resist change. They are likely to have a vested interest in existing institutions. Their perception of the world also has a tendency to remain structured by just those institutions.

When a particular economic sphere opens up and competition stemming from neighbouring fields heightens up, as is the case for example during periods of internationalisation, new actors are bound to emerge. Quite often those

will be dominant actors from neighbouring fields or, as a particular case of that, powerful foreign actors. Dominant foreign players have the strength and resources to push along their own rules of the game well beyond their traditional boundaries of activity and to attempt to institutionalise them in other spheres. They can become 'missionaries' of institutional change. Dominant local players will have a tendency to resist those changes – at least initially. When external pressure builds up, however, and/or when it combines with internal disruptions, challenges or crisis it may be the case that dominant local players turn into active promoters and agents of change. Examples of that can be found today in the Eastern part of the European continent. Nokia in the 1990s is also a well-known case.

In the contemporary context of globalisation, we point to another path that is particularly operational, we suggest. This is the direct or indirect alliance between foreign dominant actors pushing their own rules of the game and a few local players that find an interest in sponsoring those alternative rules (Djelic 1998, Djelic and Ainamo 1999, Djelic and Quack 2003). This kind of alliance takes the champions and partisans of status quo and stability through a pincer movement.

3.3 A 'stalactite' model of change – incremental but consequential

Societal institutionalism generally underscores the interdependence and close integration of institutional elements within any single national system. A common argument in that tradition is that national systems are self-reinforcing and hence quite stable equilibria. The idea is that pressures at the level of certain institutional dimensions are likely to be neutralized and absorbed by the system as a whole, leaving little or no traces behind. The possibility of change is not ruled out but it appears quite unlikely in this framework since in fact for it to happen most if not all constitutive elements of the system would have to evolve or be transformed simultaneously.

This indeed will be rare if not totally unlikely, including in situations of extreme shock or crisis or in the most acute of revolutionary episodes. As the experience of Germany after 1945 (Berghahn 1986, Schwartz 1991, Djelic 1998) or the more recent fate of Eastern European and Post Soviet countries (Stark and Bruszt 1998, Kitschelt 1999, Jones-Luong 2001) show, blitz-type interventions, shock therapies or radical institutional reengineering are bound to encounter significant resistance and obstacles that are created in part by robust and enduring institutional configurations. They will generally have much less impact than anticipated and the persistence of preexisting patterns will be stronger than expected. Hence if change is defined as a radical and time bound overhaul of the system as a whole, we are indeed quite unlikely to see change.

We propose a quite different perspective on institutional change. We argue that the succession and combination, over a long period of time, of a series of incremental transformations can lead in the end to consequential and significant change. Each single one of these incremental transformations may appear quite marginal – mitigated and partially absorbed as it is likely to be by the national institutional system as a whole. However, the succession and combination of multiple and multilevel transformations ultimately and with a longer term view of the process adds to the significance and heightens the impact of each single transformation.

The image is that of a minuscule drop of water falling from the vault of a cave. In itself, it seems totally insignificant with no impact whatsoever on the cave as a whole. However, under given conditions of temperature, the succession and combination of large numbers of droplets falling upon each other may lead to an aggregation of the calcite contained in those drops. After a (long) while the result will be the emergence of a thick landscape of innovatively shaped stalactites and stalagmites and a radical transformation, one could say, of the cave as a whole.

This image, we argue, is probably closer than the image of the ‘Big Bang’ to the way most national institutional systems change and we label our perspective on institutional change the ‘stalactite model’ of institutional change. National institutional configurations cannot dissolve and be replaced by others at the snap of fingers. Nevertheless, under repeated, multidirectional and multilevel attacks from challenger institutions and rule systems, both through what we call below trickle-up and trickle-down trajectories, national configurations may erode and be reshaped progressively through time. Instead of all constitutive elements changing together at the very same time, one should think of a process where one constitutive element after another might be weakened and destabilized. The weakness and destabilisation of each constitutive element feeds on that of the others, leading in time to a system erosion – all elements ‘giving way’ or being transformed at least in part after a while. This, naturally, can be a very slow process where change is always associated with resistance and persistence. This may be happening at least as much in an indirect and for some time subterranean way as through direct assault on national institutional frames.

4 Globalisation as Institutional Recombination

In processes of institutional emergence, decline or change, new configurations are rarely created from scratch. Rather, the genesis of institutions in contemporary societies unfolds in general in a form that is closer to ‘bricolage’ than to ex

nihilo generation (Offe 1995, Hall and Taylor 1996, March and Olsen 1998). Actors build upon, work around, recombine, reinvent and reinterpret logics and institutional arrangements that either function elsewhere or with which they are familiar. Within the context of nation states, the creation of new institutions is likely to be strongly influenced by the state, in the form of political actors or agencies (Clemens and Cook 1999). But even there, this should not blind us to the impact and significance of other actors.

The relevance of this idea of 'bricolage' (Douglas 1986) becomes only more significant when we look at processes of institutional emergence and institution building at the transnational level. We suggest, in fact, that turning our attention to the transnational level should go hand in hand with a refocusing away from the idea of institutional configurations to that of dynamic institutional recombination. Institution building in the transnational sphere involves several and sometimes multiple actors or groups of actors with mental and action maps originating from quite different institutional contexts. Very often, those originating contexts have a societal or national character (Morgan 2001a, 2000b). Hence, the process of institution building at the transnational or cross-national level cannot be conceived in total isolation and abstraction from national institutional contexts. Multiple national actors extend their national contextual rationalities into the international sphere where they interact, confront and negotiate with each other.

4.1 The international organisation: an historical scenario

Historically, a first and obvious scenario for institutional building in the transnational space has been the formal setting up of an international organisation. This, naturally, is an old scenario and with a little bit of a stretch the Roman Catholic Church could be used as an illustration, and a successful one at that. Without going that far back in history, a number of other examples come to mind. The League of Nations was an important ancestor, although with ultimately little impact (Murray 1987, Knock 1995).

In the few years following 1945, the project of structuring the transnational space around international organisations regained significance after nearly two decades of strong nationalism and protectionism. The United Nations and its various divisions, the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC later to become the OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, later to become the World Trade Organisation) all proceeded from the same logic – although the GATT or WTO may have turned out to be more of an hybrid between this first scenario and the third one to be described below.

These organisations all had a centralised core, in charge of setting the rules and building institutions at an international level. And this centralised core directly reflected the interests of national member states – as conveyed by public or semi-public types of actors such as representatives of particular national governments and polities. In that context, such international organisations were in fact little more than the tools of particular nation states and governments, mirroring at any one point in time the existing geopolitical balance of power. In time, however, the technocratic elite in charge of everyday monitoring and management could evolve its own identity that would then not be fully reducible to any single national logic.

These types of international organisations have been more or less successful in their attempt at setting the rules of the game on a transnational scale. The more successful – the IMF, the World Bank and probably also the GATT or later the WTO – have been those with some control over compliance and with sufficient means to monitor that the rules they are making are indeed being implemented. Control could stem from a degree of dependence of member states on the international organisations as well as from the capacity these organisations may have to associate rewards with compliance and sanctions with non-compliance.

4.2 A second scenario: supranational markets and regional federations

A second scenario for institution building in the transnational space follows from the temptation to create a supranational market, or even a supranational state or nation. With a little bit of a stretch, once again, and some degree of historical anachronism since a number of them were constituted before the emergence of the nation state, empires are the materialisation of such a temptation. In our modern age, the most obvious illustrations of this second scenario are constructions such as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the European Economic Community (EEC) or the European Union. There are signs that NAFTA may also be travelling that road.

Here again, the process of rule setting and institution building stems from a political, top-down kind of initiative. Public or semi-public actors, governments or their representatives are instrumental in that process even though they may not always be as predominant as in the first scenario. The scope and reach of those centrally engineered constructions goes well beyond, in general, the scope and reach of transnational organisations. The new rules and institutions are enforceable, in the sense of them being formally and efficiently associated with

enforcement mechanisms that put member states under strong pressure to comply.

In fact, the reality and strength of enforcement mechanisms combined with the scope of the domain controlled might be the key differentiating features between this type of supranational constructions on the one hand and transnational organisations on the other. A supranational construction such as the European Union is indeed characterised by the strength of enforcement mechanisms and thus by its potential clout and impact over member nations and states. One type of enforcement mechanisms are direct controls associated positively with rewards and negatively with sanctions. Another type of enforcement mechanism is the reliance on voluntary compliance where member states are aware of the overall benefits they draw from belonging to the supranational construction and, conversely, realise the dangerous consequences of not respecting the terms of a contract they entered of their own will. The European Union goes even beyond other supranational constructions in that it grants legal rights to individual citizens towards EU political bodies.

4.3 Self-regulating transnational communities: scenario of the future?

We turn to a third scenario for institution building in the transnational space to which we associate the label 'self-regulating transnational communities'. We propose that this scenario has become progressively more widespread in recent years. In this third scenario, all actors concerned by a particular type of transnational activity come together, generally in non structured and little formalised settings, to elaborate and agree upon collective rules of the game (Morgan and Engwall 1999, Cutler et al. 1999, Djelic and Bensedrine 2001). In contrast to the first two scenarii, public or semi-public actors might be involved in rule setting but they are not the only ones. In fact, private actors might take the initiative and be quite instrumental for the elaboration of rules and the building of institutions as well as for monitoring compliance (Lehmkuhl 2003, McNichol and Bensedrine 2003).

Another difference with the two previous scenarii is that the logic at work is not one of external control but rather self-disciplining or self-regulation. Instead of waiting for public actors to impose an institutional frame and thus orient private action, the actors concerned and in particular non governmental and private actors, take the initiative and set their own rules. Within an arena or a field of transnational activity lacking initially in structuration, all concerned actors collaborate in building institutional arrangements that will constrain their own actions, behaviours and interactions. The process is one of voluntary and rela-

tively informal negotiations, the emerging structural arrangements are of a relatively amorphous, fluid and multifocal nature.

Self-disciplining transnational communities of that sort tend to rely on two main categories of enforcement mechanisms. One is voluntary compliance, but compliance this time not only of national states and governments but also directly of all actors involved in the process. Compliance is voluntary for the main reason that these actors define the rules themselves and inflict upon themselves the institutional constraints that will bound their own actions and interactions. A second enforcement mechanism, socialisation, can be identified – although probably more as a potential and an objective than as an already existing and concrete reality. Indeed, socialisation can only emerge as an enforcement mechanism in a later stage. Rules and institutions have to be constructed and agreed upon (the habituation or pre-institutionalisation stage identified above), actors have to function within that frame for a while (objectification), before the double process of socialisation and self-reproduction through socialisation can really become operative (sedimentation). The advantage of socialisation as an enforcement mechanism is the decreasing need for direct controls, and thus for both external rewards and sanctions. Actors that are being socialised through a particular institutional frame or in a particular set of rules become their own watchdogs. Ultimately, the institutional frame and the set of rules should ‘disappear’, to the extent that, after a while, they have a tendency to become neutral and transparent for those actors that function within the space they structure.

Some of the elements of the third scenario for institution building at a transnational level are not new. As argued by Lehmkuhl (2003) for example, the structuring of commercial arbitration at the transnational level by actors themselves – and in particular by private actors – has existed for a long time. One could also argue that international cartels, particularly during the interwar period but even after in some industries (Cutler et al. 1999, Glimstedt 2001, Lilja and Moen 2003), fit within this type of scenario. Self-regulated forms of transnational economic coordination are recently going through a period of ‘revival’ after long decades when national states had all but established a monopoly over the handling of transnational issues and spaces (Héritier 2002).

In fact, we propose that there has been an historical evolution overall, since 1945, in terms of which scenario has been predominant. The early period, in the years following the war, was characterised by the multiplication of transnational organisations. Then came the time of supranational constructions – particularly in Western Europe. This, naturally, is still going on. At the same time, increasing empirical evidence points for the recent period in the direction of a greater role and place for self-disciplining transnational communities (Braithwaite and Dra-

hos 2000, Brunsson and Jacobsson 2000, Djelic and Quack 2003). Professions are one particular type of such communities but they are far from the only one.

4.4 Transnational recombination: mode and nature of the process

In each of these three different scenarii, transnational institution building can be analysed as a process of reinterpretation, recombination and bricolage of institutional fragments from different contextual origins. We suggest that there are three different modes in which the rubbing, contestation and recombination of different institutional fragments can take place at the transnational level.

A first, obvious, mode we label here 'dominant'. In that mode, the building of institutions at a transnational level simply reflects one dominant local or national model. Rules originating from one particular national space thus shape in a rather direct way the transnational space. In a second stage, this local turned transnational model is bound to have an impact on a number of other national institutional configurations as we will argue below. This overall process generally reflects the objective and/or perceived strength of the 'dominant' nation, which itself depends on a combination of economic, military and geo-political factors with some degree of ideological propping up. Undeniably, since 1945, this role of the 'dominant' nation has been played by the United States and this particular mode of recombination can be referred to as a process of Americanisation (Djelic 1998).

A second mode emerges that we label the 'negotiated' mode. Institution building in the transnational space can come about through the confrontation or 'rubbing against each other' of multiple locals or nationals, leading to what can be described as a process of negotiation. McNichol and Bensedrine (2003) or Ventresca et al. (2003) point to the interplay in fact between the 'negotiated' and the 'dominant' mode. All participants to the negotiations are not created equal and one of them – here again the United States – looms significantly larger than the others in the process. This underscores the ideal typical nature of the different modes we identify and the likelihood that they will coexist and interact in real life contexts. In fact, while situations of negotiation are rarely perfectly balanced, a situation of dominance is on the other hand rarely so extreme as to leave no space for at least partial negotiation. In the context of what was described above as 'Americanisation', for example, what many empirical studies show is the concomitant partial alteration, translation and negotiation of the 'dominant' model when it comes into contact with previously existing and established national institutional configurations (Djelic 1998, Zeitlin and Herrigel 2000, Amdam et al. forthcoming, Djelic and Quack 2003).

Common to illustrations of both the 'dominant' and 'negotiated' modes is the fact that the actors involved – whoever and whatever they are – remain strongly embedded in and shaped by the institutional contexts of their home countries. These actors tend in fact to extend the actions and strategies used in that context and shaped by it to the transnational arena. This, however, is not necessarily always the case. The involvement of actors in processes of transnational institution building can – particularly if sustained and recurring over longer periods of time – lead to a blurring of identities, particularly national ones (Morgan 2001a). Once transnational arenas have been structured for a while, once transnational institutions and rules of the game shape behaviours and interactions, some of the actors concerned come to be more directly affected by these transnational institutions than by the institutions of the country they may originate from. New actors may also sprout up for which the only referent will be the embryonic transnational institutional context where they were born (e.g. some transnational NGOs, lobbying organisations created at the European level, see Salk et al. 2001).

Any further process of transnational institution building in that context cannot anymore fit under the categories of either the 'dominant' or the 'negotiated' mode. What takes place then is what we label, for lack of a better word, an 'emergent' process. Multiple actors with no clear identities and functioning themselves at the interface of multiple rule systems, come in collision with each other. If we are to follow the metaphorical use of chaos theory in social sciences, the result in this case is bound to be unpredictable (Thietart and Forgues 1997). Constructions originating from this 'emergent mode' tend to become detached from their multiple national roots and develop a dynamic of their own as a truly transnational space (Barnett and Finnemore 1999).

The three modes identified here are clearly ideal types. There is bound to be, in other words, interaction and interplay between them in real life situations. At the same time, we suggest that there has been a shift over time in their relative importance. This shift parallels to quite a degree the evolution, in terms of scenario, identified above. In the immediate post-World War II years, we have argued, the main scenario for transnational institution building was the setting up of international organisations. During this period, the dominant mode – one national model, the American one, imposing itself on a transnational scale – was all but overwhelming. The dominant mode has not entirely disappeared with the attempts at supranational construction. But such projects, by their very nature, meant and required some degree of negotiation between the several member nations that were shaping them, generally on a world regional basis. Finally, the move towards the third scenario – transnational institution building by self-disciplining transnational communities – coincides quite closely with the slow assertion of an emergent mode. It seems furthermore to fit particularly the case of transnational institution building across world regions – in what gets close to being a 'global' space.

5 Globalisation and National Institutional Change

Ongoing processes of institutional recombination at the transnational level, as described in the previous section, have a high potential to challenge and undermine institutional stability and identical reproduction at the national level. Transnational institutional frames in the making are likely to challenge, to confront and to change – even though slowly and incrementally – national institutional systems. They can do so through direct impact – what we call here ‘trickle-down’ effects or mechanisms. When transnational organisations or supranational constructions (e.g. the WTO, the IMF or the World Bank or the European Union) exert pressure directly at the national level on member governments to redefine national rules of the game, then we have what we call ‘trickle-down’ effects or mechanisms.

The impact can also be more indirect. Through cross-national interactions at subsocietal or meso levels – sectors, industries, professions or even from region to region – actors are being drawn into social spaces that extend well beyond their national context of origin. In that process, those actors are likely to be confronted with and to have to function within sets of rules that may be quite different from those of their country of origin. Subsocietal actors become the vectors and transmission belts through which those new rules are brought into a given national space. In certain circumstances, those subsocietal actors may be more than mere messengers. They may become real mediators and contribute to pushing those new rules up towards the national institutional level, fostering in the process a transformation of the national business system or of the national business rationality. This path or pattern we associate with ‘trickle-up’ effects or mechanisms.

5.1 Trickle-down trajectories

The challenge, naturally, may come from transnational organisations or supranational constructions. Those organisations and constructions quite often turn out to be rule-making bodies and some of them have gained significant and direct influence over national politics. This is clearly the case with the European Union (Leibfried and Pierson 1995, Fligstein and Mara-Drita 1996, Sandholtz and Stone Sweet 1998, Plehwe 2001). With respect to the economic realm, other transnational organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) or the World Trade Organisation (WTO) should be mentioned. These organisations contribute to the diffusion of particular rules of the game, which are likely to collide with incumbent rules or practices in many national spaces.

Less attention has been paid to the scenario where challenger rules emerge from a transnational space lacking formal structure and being, as a consequence, less visible. What we have said above about self-disciplining transnational communities indicates that rule setting and rule making can also take place in transnational fields or arenas lacking structuration in relative terms. Actors – all kinds of actors, from private firms to consumers, lobbies, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) or state representatives – come together to negotiate and agree on rules of the game. Examples can be found in the regulation of financial markets (Morgan 2001a, Ventresca et al. 2003) or international commercial arbitration (Dezalay and Garth 1996, Lehmkuhl 2003). Those rules of the game are institutions, to the extent that they structure action and economic activity. For the most part, those are cognitive and normative institutions (Meyer and Rowan 1977). The rules that emerge or are negotiated in that context are essentially norms that are enacted, appropriated and enforced by the actors themselves. (ML: took out once sentence here).

Once transnational institutions or rules are there or in the making, the question moves to the conditions in which they may come indeed to trickle-down to the national level with a potentially significant impact upon incumbent national institutions. One important variable appears to be the degree of centrality of a particular country, through its private and public representatives, in the process of construction and stabilisation of transnational rules. It seems fair to differentiate between at least three main groups of countries in that respect. The United States plays quite a unique role even though it does not always manage to impose the solution that will best serve its interests. An explanation to that special place and role lies in the unique position of geopolitical dominance that has characterised that country after 1945 (Djelic 1998, Braithwaite and Drahos 2000). A second group is made up of a few core (and rather rich) countries, which are proactive and quite involved in trying to shape the process. The third group finally is the larger one and brings together those countries with a more passive connection to the process.

Empirical evidence seems to show that compliance may be more regular, once the rules have been agreed upon, within the second group of countries, rich core countries. In the third group of countries, appropriation seems to be more of an issue and the decoupling between global rules and local practices can be quite significant (Meyer et al. 1997a, Meyer et al. 1997b). In the case of the United States, geopolitical power allows for irregular and changing patterns of compliance even when that country has played a significant role in the process of elaboration of global rules (McNichol and Bensedrine 2003, ENS 2001, Libération 2002).

Other variables with an impact on trickle-down trajectories are the nature of incumbent rules and the degree of dependence of a particular country on exter-

nal players. We hypothesise that a country where local rules are weak, either because they lack legitimacy, have proven inefficient or a hindrance, are altogether absent or still at a pre-institutionalisation stage, creates more space for rules constructed at a transnational level to trickle-down. This can only be reinforced in situations of dependence, where a country for example sees the granting of financial assistance it badly needs being conditioned upon compliance to a set of transnationally defined rules (Djelic 1998). A special and quite different case of dependence should be mentioned here. Direct political dependence of national countries on a supranational construction, such as is the case in the European Union context, is an obvious path for trickle-down mechanisms. This situation naturally creates conditions where the rules defined at the supranational level are likely indeed to have a rapid and significant impact at the national level.

5.2 Trickle-up trajectories

Threats and challenges to national institutional systems may also come from below, from subsocietal or subnational levels. Such 'trickle-up' trajectories can be of two kinds. First, national actors crossing national borders may find that the rules of the game with which they are familiar come into collision and sometimes even are in contradiction with rules of the game dominant elsewhere. Those national actors could be individuals, groups of individuals, firms, associations or networks of firms. This type of scenario will be all the more widespread that the internationalisation of economic activities and of exchanges in general is becoming increasingly dense and intense.

The opening up of national economies may stimulate a second scenario that is parallel but goes the other direction. Foreign actors move into a given national space with rules of the game that are quite different from those of local actors. A variant of that scenario is when the champions of challenger rules on the local or national scene are themselves locals or nationals who are pushing for new rules of the game in order to carve a space for themselves. What this is all about is the attempt by new or emerging actors, whether local outsiders or foreign entrants or even a combination of both, to redefine rules of the game in an industry or impose 'new' ones in order to enter the field and the game and to reshape it to their advantage (Djelic and Ainamo 1999, Lane 2001, Kleiner 2003).

Various empirical studies show how this encounter between incumbent and challenger rules plays out at subsocietal levels, whether at the level of the firm (Lane 2000, Tainio et al. 2001), at the level of an industry (Lilja and Moen 2003), an organisational field (Kleiner 2003) or at the level of a profession (Quack 2000, McKenna et al. 2003). This interplay at the subsocietal level is not

neutral for national institutions. Rules of the game may change at the sub-societal level well before this is institutionalised at the national level. But transformations at the subsocietal level may also reverberate in time at the national institutional level. The decision by the German government in 2001 to create a Kodex-Kommission in charge of 'modernising the rules and practices of German capitalism' is a clear case of such a process of post hoc 'regularisation' (Le Monde, 7 November 2001). The object of this commission is to take stock of changes that have already redefined the German economic game and to institutionalise them at the national level. For some, this may be formally ringing the knell of Rhenan capitalism (Institut de l'Entreprise 2001). This raises questions about the conditions in which contestation and transformation of incumbent rules of the game at the subsocietal level are likely indeed to reflect and impact on the national level.

One such condition seems to be the central position and overall leverage of the subsocietal actors concerned by or involved in the collision of rules. Changes within core and strategic firms or industries are more likely, ultimately, to have some impact on national level institutions. This appears to be particularly true in smaller countries as shown by the cases of Nokia in Finland (Tainio et al. 2001) or of the forest industry in Norway and Finland (Lilja and Moen 2003). In smaller countries, core firms or industries have proportionally more clout, strategic importance but also leverage which could explain their more direct impact.

Other important conditions are the strength and legitimacy of those outsiders championing and pushing for challenger rules. In that respect, Anglo-Saxon players benefit from something akin to a 'trademark' advantage in professional fields such as corporate law or management consulting as well as in other activities related to banking or financing. This allows them to be more forceful and convincing in the promotion of their own sets of rules of the game. Naturally, the strength and legitimacy of those outsiders and challengers will be more or less filtered and mitigated by the existence and embeddedness of local incumbent rules. Local appropriation will likely be more complex and contested in situations where incumbent rules already exist and are deeply embedded – when, in other words, local institutional rules have already entered the phase of sedimentation.

Another condition seems important that is not unrelated to those identified above. The greater the shock or the more intense the collision, the more likely that it will reverberate at the national level. The collision will be more intense if subsocietal actors – firms, industries, professions or even possibly regions – lack protective buffers or else are in a situation of perceived and self-acknowledged crisis. The lack of protection can be due to the immaturity of the local field. It can be strategically engineered, either by political authorities or by the

actors themselves, through deregulation for example or a lowering of trade or other protective barriers (Djelic and Ainamo 1999). It will also be related, naturally, to the strength of the push coming from outsiders and challenger rules. A perceived and self-acknowledged situation of crisis will tend to correspond, on the other hand, to a high degree of dissatisfaction with incumbent rules, either because these rules do not seem to coevolve with environmental conditions and/or because they narrow the opportunities of local and incumbent actors in a changing world.

We argue that under these conditions – or a subset thereof – transformations in rules of the game that were initially happening at a subsocietal level are likely to have an impact and reverberate, after a while, at the national level.

6 Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that faced with the ongoing debates on globalisation, societal institutionalism in its traditional form is showing its limits. Central elements of this type of approach will have to be reconsidered and reformulated if it is to contribute to ongoing debates on global governance. In our view, the focus of analysis has to shift away from the present concern with national configurations towards attempts at understanding transnational recombination.

In this paper, we have made suggestions on how to extend societal institutionalism so that it could be better prepared for this task. We point in three directions in particular. First, we insist on the necessity to move away from a focus on institutions and towards the double idea of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation as ongoing processes. Then, we insist on the need to bring actors back in. We suggest that it is particularly important to look at the interplay between actors and institutions at those moments of fragility for institutions when external pressure combines with internal disruptions. Hence, the interfaces between national and transnational (or foreign) actors and institutions deserve, we argue, great attention. Finally, we bring in a new perspective on institutional change, overcoming the sterile dichotomy between the impossibility of change on the one hand and its extremely rare occurrence in the form of radical overhaul on the other. Our proposition is that the succession and combination, over a long period of time, of a series of incremental and sometimes minor transformations could lead in the end to consequential and significant change. This we call the ‘stalactite model’ of change.

Building on this reformulation of societal institutionalism, we are able to extend its usefulness to get at a better understanding of the transnational sphere

and of globalisation. We reinterpret globalisation as multilayered processes of transnational institution building and recombination. We can also take seriously the challenge that globalisation hence reinterpreted represents for national or societal institutions. Globalisation as transnational institution building and recombination creates pressure at the national level, through different channels and following different trajectories. The multiplication of those points of interface between the national and the transnational where pressure is being felt creates the conditions, through time, for a 'stalactite' type process of change that ultimately may be quite significant and consequential.

At the methodological level, the analysis of processes of 'stalactite change' requires not only a shift in research design from a focus on country cases or even country comparisons to the analysis of linkages between the international and national spheres. It also calls for a more frequent use of historical and longitudinal research designs and methodology. Empirical studies need to encompass the multi-directional causalities between actors and institutions, and between the national and transnational level. In the past, a narrow definition of 'path dependency' had led societal institutionalism, as far as it has undertaken longitudinal studies, to trace existing institutions back to the past. The challenge for future studies is to take a more open approach which also considers the alternative directions which institutional development can take at certain points and the unintended consequences which might result from emergent processes over longer periods of time. A coordination and matching of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of similar and related phenomena at various levels could help to make a first step in this direction.

With the revisions and extensions suggested in this paper, societal institutionalism can contribute, we believe, to a better understanding of the globalisation phenomenon. Bringing institutions back into the transnational arena makes for a richer debate on globalisation. Instead of appearing as an a-historical, impersonal and neutral force, the significance and specific features of this recent period of internationalisation of economic activity are brought to the fore which have to do with a sustained level both of institutional change in the national context and of institution building and recombination in the transnational space. Discussions about the internationalisation of exchanges, flows of goods, money, technology, practices, organisations and people (e.g. Ohmae 1990, Sassen 1998, Giddens 2000, Guillén 2001) appear less fundamental from this point of view. At the very same time, pointing to the tight connections between institutions and globalisation should allow us to make a contribution to the institutionalist literature. By taking globalisation seriously and pointing to its institutional dimension, we can reconcile the idea of institutional embeddedness with processes of change and emergence and therefore open new venues for the institutionalist perspective.

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